

"SIEMPRE FELIZ EN MI FALDA"

Luis Alfaro's Simulative Challenge

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I want to meet you at the / intersection of possibility," declares Luis Alfaro in his prose and poetry sequence "Cuerpo politizado." In this work the Los Angeleno Chicano writer and occasionally cross-dressing performance artist announces a particularly important intersection of possibility with the line that appears in this essay's title.¹ Alfaro conjoins the semiotics of the body with semantics, for the call-to-drag simulation encapsulated in the phrase, translated as "always happy in my skirt," also connotes for some Chicanos and Chicanas a playful adaptation of the English *gay* into the Spanish *feliz* and hence of the phrase into "always queer in my skirt."

If this polyvalence alerts us to the identificatory possibility of Alfaro's "Chicano queer" intersection, it also insinuates the possibility that simulation might represent the key to Alfaro's intervention into queer and Chicano critical practice. The importance of his intervention lies in the very apparitional matter at play in his attempts to simulate a "politicized body" signed queer onto one signed Chicano, and vice versa. To explore Alfaro's simulative project in greater detail, I examine the deployment of a range of transvestite and other bodily appearances in three of Alfaro's published and oral works (as opposed to his better-known stage pieces): the story "Bitter Homes and Gardens," "Cuerpo politizado" (with photographs), and the prose sequence "Pico-Union," along with its oral version, *Down Town*.² In these texts Alfaro works with simulation as a political tactic aimed not at fixity or disappearance but at mobility, at appearance, at Chicano queer visibility. I want to identify the semiotic parameters of Alfaro's simulative challenge, or the signifying battle of appearances that he relishes: how to recognize, decode, and recode the conflicting signs by and through which Alfaro's version of Chicano queer appears in and to the world. I am interested in why, and with what resistant

possibilities and limits, the simulative challenge, a transcultural challenge as well, is manifested in Alfaro's texts.

A Transcultural Intersection: Chicano and Queer

If one conjunction can be said to center the varied performative and textual projects in which Alfaro appears, it is that of Chicano and queer. Alfaro tends to render the meeting of these identity markers as a struggle between appearances that is characterized by two interrelated processes: first, his movement through the messily transculturated zone of Los Angeles's barrios and, second, the staging of equally messy battles between rival signifying systems and disciplinary discourses by the apparitional matter of his body. By drawing attention to the conflicts of signification played on and over his own body, Alfaro's work highlights the quotidian complexities of inhabiting the interstices of two national (U.S. and Mexican) and cultural (Anglo- and Latin American) histories of antagonism, exchange, and change.

Since his interstitial experiences become the semiotic matter of politicized possibility, Alfaro joins a *frontera* critical tradition that recognizes that, despite rigorous border regulations, Anglo-America and Latin America have long bled into each other along the U.S.-Mexico frontier, with a concomitant blurring of cultural, economic, racial, linguistic, and sexual categories. Such blurring is often manifested in and as bodily relations to space: shifts in national, collective, and personal identifications that are linked to the border's function in a migratory economy; movements, tactics, and rituals undertaken in response to regulated but shifting limits; and perceptions of self as literally and figuratively crossed by rival value systems. Thus many writers have conceded to the *frontera* trope an in-built, unpredictable, and potentially radical capacity for personal and group resistance and transformation. Among many notable Borderlands positions, we might mention four: Gloria Anzaldúa's conception of *la frontera* as an open wound that is simultaneously a crossroads of mestiza self-fashioning ambiguity and unforeseeable possibility; Susana Chávez-Silverman's *fronterótica*, by which the Borderlands are resignified or "retropicalized" into a zone of Chicana bisexual desire; Alfred Arteaga's endorsement of such Chicana moves to reimagine the Borderlands as an amorphous third country that does not replicate a neoliberal nation-state dream, because the ambiguous promise is embodied in the Borderlands' mestizo residents; and Annamarie Jagose's salutary warnings about "the fundamental irresolution of the legislative border" and about the hegemonic complicities to which *frontera* theorists and queer Borderlands residents may not be immune.³

Alignable up to a point with each of these approaches, Alfaro's work distinguishes itself from them by focusing on the powerful, disciplinarian reach of hegemonic processes in such Borderlands extensions as the transculturated barrios of Los Angeles where Alfaro grew up. The central presence of a Chicano gay male imaginary that is underattended in border theory and overlooked in American cultural fields also sets his writings apart: "I call myself a gay Chicano. I create work that asks questions about identity and social power and addresses the intersection of nationality and sexuality. More than all that, I am trying to tell the story of my people, of what it means to live in a city like Los Angeles, to give voice to the stories that have not been heard."⁴

To describe Alfaro's location as transculturated is to recognize his residence in a city where Latino, Anglo-, and other American sectors coexist, conflict with each other, and engender new cultural forms of resistance. Alfaro's Chicano queer identification is subject to the three simultaneous processes identified by Fernando Ortiz: cultural acquisition, or "acculturation"; partial cultural destruction or loss, or "deculturation"; and the production of "new cultural phenomena," or "neoculturation."⁵ As Silvia Spitta notes, this tripartite conceptualization foregrounds the processes of cultural formation that are "forever deferred and forever in the making."⁶ Following Ángel Rama, the notion of neocultural deferral emphasizes the agency, selectivity, and inventiveness of social actors attempting to counter the "deterioros" [damages] of transculturation. For Rama, an uncompromisingly local, nonmetropolitan transcultural will implies the dynamic interplay of cultural losses, conflicts, choices, re-formations, and resistances.⁷

It is in these senses, particularly that of neocultural deferral, that I deploy transculturation in relation to Alfaro. However, if we recognize the agency and creative interventions of contact-zone subjects such as Alfaro in a transcultural "toma y daca" [give-and-take],⁸ we must also account for his resorting to an array of split, relational, and multiple identificatory possibilities—regional, national, communal, linguistic, classed, generational, racialized, gendered, and sexualized—the last two of which have often been neglected in transcultural analyses. For example, when Alfaro works with the term *queer*, a transcultural reading must explain how his sexuality is accorded value in multiple discursive and physical territories in which the significations of *queer* also change. Above all, such a reading must account for Alfaro's willful targeting of various epistemological assumptions as a cultural agent committed to creating unforeseen and less damaging significations. To render such an accounting, I propose the notion of semioculturation. *Queer* itself provides an apt example, for not only has its deployment as an Anglophone term of

homophobic abuse been confronted by its newly combatant, uncowed uses, but both of these applications are subject to resignification in places where rival Anglo- and Chicano American bodily economies and linguistic traditions circulate.

Alfaro's semioculturation of queer—that is, as a far-from-secured identification emerging in and as a simulative process—also serves as a warning not automatically or invariably to see in queer a counterhegemonic will that succeeds because of its attentiveness to a discourse of happy heterogeneity. Teresa de Lauretis, for example, argues that queer has to do with “the respective and/or common grounding of current discourses and practices of homo-sexualities in relation to gender and racialization, with their attendant differences of class or ethnic culture, generational, geographical, and sociopolitical location.”⁹ However, the necessary focus on multiple, potentially incompatible locations may not preclude *queer*, like *gay* and *lesbian* before it, from perpetuating and reinforcing the homogenizing rhetoric of an America as a First World, nation-state dream.¹⁰ Alfaro's conjoined Chicano and queer identity markers always signal a fraught taxonomic reconversion of a self in contravention of the disciplinarian discourses by which cultures and citizens are deemed to belong in and to the United States.

At the same time, Alfaro's Chicano queer emerges as a challenge to the ways in which Anglo-American gay, lesbian, and queer identifications may function as normative, exclusionary paradigms. Anzaldúa has claimed that the origins of the “lesbian” in Greek myth perpetuate the idea that her “forefathers and foremothers are European,” not indigenous, and that the community operating under the name “lesbian” is always already “a *gringa* community,” a beneficiary of the invasions that produced mestizos and Mexican-Americans.¹¹ Aside from these cultural and racial biases, which also apply to *gay*, Tomás Almaguer explains that queer Chicanos may “have never occupied the social space where a gay or lesbian identity can readily become a primary basis of self-identity.” This condition reflects the “structural position [of Chicanos] at the subordinate ends of both the class and racial hierarchies, and in a context where ethnicity remains a primary basis of group identity and survival.”¹²

These considerations are important. However, my attempt to plot Alfaro's Chicano queer identification under which his semiocultural tactics resist the embodied effects of certain disciplinarian discourses and signifying systems also leads me to depart from Almaguer's position. In his analysis, still the most insightful overview of Chicano male homosexuality, Almaguer proposes a typology of points on an identificatory continuum along which Chicano and Latino gay male sexual practices may be located. These points range from two Latino categories defined strictly by passive or active sexual roles to three categories of increasing

assimilation into an Anglo-American gay model; the final position is "Latino men who are fully assimilated into the white . . . gay male community . . . and [who] retain only a marginal Latino identity" (88–89). This full assimilation into "homosexuality" is defined as an embrace of the supposedly "more egalitarian norms of the North American sexual system" (89).

I want to dispense with this continuum for two reasons. First, by constructing it as an inexorable passage toward assimilation that is predicated on the deculturation of the Latino, Almaguer does not account for how Latino queers may shift between identifications, knowingly, creatively, or by compulsion, as they move in time between Latino and queer spaces. Nor does his typology indicate how rival signifying processes incessantly and unpredictably interrupt each other on the Chicano queer body no matter what identificatory space, Chicano or gay, may be occupied at a particular moment or place. In the writings of Gil Cuadros, for example, the author's gay identity preference does not signify an unequivocally gay rather than Chicano choice. Cuadros may appear to fit Almaguer's assimilated gay position, but his gayness never escapes Chicano significations, and vice versa. Thus Cuadros's constant decoding and recoding of the self as he experiences the bodily and behavioral burdens of Latino and Anglo sexual semiotic systems challenge the coherence of Almaguer's assimilated identity end point.¹³ A similar signifying battle characterizes Alfaro's Chicano queer semiocultural agenda, which has transformative implications for Anglo-gay, Chicano, and indeed American imaginaries, for transcultural processes, however unequally felt or manifested, affect all involved sectors.¹⁴

Second, Almaguer's typology establishes a teleology of becoming gay by which the nongay Latino *pasivo* and *activo* are both implicitly cast into the realm of the antiegalitarian. Thus it perpetuates a notion of Latino male homosexuality as irredeemably negativized and repressive and as potentially unimaginable. David Román counters this epistemology by insisting that homosexual identities are both meaningfully imaginable and identifiable throughout the Latin Americas and their U.S. extensions. Accordingly, he argues for the need to "foreground 'gayness' in order to challenge the often misdirected and homophobic assumption that results from . . . the denial of the reality of homosexuality as a possible identity based on the 'sexual aim' epistemology" that dominates analyses of Latin American sexualities. This need impels him to "avoid complying with the paradigmatic binarism that posits gay identity, on the one hand, as a denial of an imagined 'authentic' Latino ethnicity and Latino identity, on the other hand, as an indicator of internalized homophobia."¹⁵ Román's salutary warning suggests the productive, desimplifying value of the transculturated queer approach I advocate.

Returning now with Alfaro to the Borderlands disputed by rival Americas, I want to follow him as he broadly sketches an imagined Chicano family's gender and sexual conventions and insinuates a queer reappraisal of them.

Comings-Out Damaged into America

In Alfaro's acidic, soap-operatic story "Bitter Homes and Gardens," the daughter and parents in a Chicano family describe the places they occupy in America. Although their familial relationships are confirmed by the plot, the speakers are divided by barriers of incomprehension and frustration. The family's home ground is rent by each member's experience of the wider space of American promise, which is suggested by the daughter's opening assertion that she is "more" than her job handing out "free miniature hotdogs" implies.¹⁶ Her potential has been invested in her "perfect posture," the result of an operation that "ensured a back as straight as a line," embodying purpose and direction (100). Thus reconstructed, she is climbing the socioeconomic ladder toward her dream of being a Las Vegas hostess and achieving "a life fulfilled" (100). As she drolly explains, "a series of choices" has led to her various incarnations so far (101): housewife, murderer, and feminist. Indeed, with the murder of her first husband, "the day laborer and heroin addict," her life as an idiosyncratic feminist begins: "A backless toga is what I would be honored to wear. This causes much distress in my hostess/feminist support group" (102). Such are her responses to "the issues that women face in the modern world" or, more correctly, in the kitsch simulacrum of a Las Vegas whose community pillars are Liberace and Wayne Newton (102).

Although a resident of a kitsch zone, the daughter qualifies the choices available to her by calling attention to her meal-ticket posture: "Look at my back. Straight as a line. The vertebrae. A delicate little gift inching up our backs. I have always been poised for perfection" (102). Her American dream-life is always deferred, however, and her straight back suggests not upward mobility but a borderline yet to be crossed. Through her parents' testimony we sense what she means when she says, "I was born imperfectly" (102). Her imperfection, it is implied, is the Chicano family and deculturated from her narrative. She has remodeled herself to keep her background at a distance, only to find herself forever poised to enter an American dream closed to her. As a Chicana, she is closeted.

The father's testimony presents a very different engagement with America. He dreams of "killing a moose with my bare hands" as representatives of the American men's movement gaze on (103). But the dream betrays his bafflement, for he has nothing in common with these "ethical animal people" (103). Racial-

ized and classed positions determine the father's view of America, and so he recognizes no difference between New Age "healers" and the bosses at the printshop where he works: all are "white people" on the backs of Mexicans (103). In his dream the father kills the moose, which for him is an elusive signifier but for the reader connotes the closed-door, homosocial fraternities outside the father's ambit. The dream indicates his symbolic powerlessness as well. His wife, home, and world have ceased to anchor him. Although his testimony ends with the affirmation "I'm alive, I can see it and I know what's going on" (103), his defiant tone underscores his alienation from an America beyond his reach as a working-class Chicano, and it suggests his impotence as traditional authority in the Chicano family.

The mother's version of America is the most bitter, although she prefers to call it "miserable": "That's a big difference. The difference between being a woman and being a housewife" (105). Opening with the personal-as-political, protofeminist line "I wanna talk a little bit about desire" (103), her narrative details her frustrated desires. Making tortillas, raising a family, reflecting on passions that are now only memories, and turning forty are the highlights of an unappreciated life:

Did anybody notice?
 Not my father.
 Not my husband.
 Not my god.
 None of those *men*. (105)

The mother identifies two alternatives to what she has been: "a broad, . . . because the only women with real control in their lives are broads," or "that asshole, that role model for all women, Sally Jesse Raphael" (104). The second one is dismissed, since the talk-show host embodies an Anglo-American womanly ideal utterly outside the mother's experiences: "I bet you she's never made tortillas. Well listen Sally fucking Jesse, maybe you've got the pulse on how rotten your life is, but you don't know shit about America"—unlike the mother, for "traces of America . . . [t]alk-show hosts and T.V. evangelists are deeply woven into the fabric of this house" (104–5). This America is disturbing and overwhelming. "Anger and loneliness," "sadness," "desperation and isolation," she says, "I saw it all. . . . I saw America all over the place." Pervasive, inescapable America finally drives her into a mental institution. It is there, while contemplating life after institutionalization, that she proclaims, "I saw my cunt" (106).

With this statement, the mother defines the recuperation of repressed

desire as her most urgent goal. Sexual liberation is envisaged as a coming out, not simply in the literal sense of psychic recovery but also in imitation of “the guys in the gay bars”: “I’m gonna call my mom and everybody on the block and say, ‘Hey you guys, guess what? I’m back. Just like I was in 1969. I went to somewhere like hell, like Hollywood and Western, and I’m back.’” But her testimony ends, after she has “reached down there and . . . tasted a force of nature,” with words that fix her desire for the American dream in the past: “I saw it alright. All of it. I saw America” (106). She acknowledges the need for a new sense of place. But unlike the gay men and lesbians for whom 1969 signifies Stonewall, a key moment in the American gay rights movement, she has only her daughter to help her achieve her liberation. And her daughter has also been damaged by America, despite the poised promise of her back.

If the mother has rejected the domestic roles propagated by the Chicano family and the American dream relayed by television, then where, to whom, and as what can she come out? The questions are left unanswered. Yet the story insinuates a possibility in the intersection of a Chicana mother’s liberatory desires with those of the gay and lesbian rights movement. The closet has not been, Alfaro hints, a regulatory structure for Anglo gay and lesbian subjects only. Indeed, parents and daughter occupy closets built along classed, gendered, racialized, and, for the mother, heterosexualized lines. Alfaro’s story supports Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s thesis that “‘the closet’ and ‘coming out’” are “now verging on all-purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representation.”¹⁷ But Alfaro semioculturates the closet not only to account for the charged relations within a Chicano family imaginary but to acknowledge the Borderlands as a crisis-ridden space where Anglo- and Chicano American sexual epistemologies overlap.

Perhaps even more important in this story—indeed, throughout Alfaro’s work—the semioculturation of the closet informs a fundamental mode of resistance to hegemony. That mode is kitsch. But as Alfaro’s playful references to such signifiers as Liberace and hostess gowns suggest, Alfaro’s version of kitsch might be better termed camp. This is not to claim the terms’ synonymity but to recognize the operations in Alfaro’s project of what José Esteban Muñoz regards as the Latino queer “production and consumption of kitsch objects and/or sensibilities.”¹⁸ For Muñoz, this variety of camp arises from a twofold process of neoculturation: “a certain [Latino] mode of cross-generational, cross-cultural recycling” combined with the “convergences, alignments, and reverberations” that take place between it and “the camp produced by sexual minorities” (131). In “Bitter Homes and Gardens” Alfaro’s deployment of this “survivalist mode of identity enactment

within a phobic public sphere" (131) allows him to interpolate a queer sensibility into a fabricated Borderlands family space.

The "survivalist mode" is also linked to the operations of a complicated border epistemology. At least for the father in Alfaro's fictive Chicano home, the family is seen as a precarious bulwark against America; hence the need to reinforce the borders of gender and sexual propriety in the domestic space. These borders do not preclude the desires of daughter and parents to come out into the socioeconomic promise of America beyond the home, but the comings out prove ineffectual. The story's players are confined by the "discourse of boundaries" that circumscribes the American dream and that "implies either that one is encompassed within *sans* restraints or that if one is without, one can always get in, that is, transcend the boundaries."¹⁹ However, Chicanos are not simply in or out of America. They are in America by default, because of an imperial takeover of Mexican territory, and often perceive themselves as excluded from a nation that has not granted them the rights or material security that other groups enjoy. Thus Alfaro's story points to the regulatory impact that border and sexual epistemologies have on the ostensibly heterosexual Chicanos he describes. These structures militate against the Chicano quest for a space in, but not subsumed by, America.

With such implications Alfaro's story evokes the Chicano movement's concept of Aztlán, the mythical Aztec homeland identified with the American Southwest, lost by Mexico in 1848. In both geographic and utopian senses Aztlán defined Chicanos as residents of occupied territory who were prepared for a material and metaphoric reclamation of a national homeland.²⁰ Since the 1960s Aztlán and related Chicano movement symbols have been disputed and revised by Chicana feminists, who have sought to include and address women's positions within the oppositional rhetoric. Their work is part of the background of Alfaro's story, which hints at a queer adaptation in its camp-framed calls to come out from Borderlands marginalization and to sexualize the discourses of Chicano resistance.

These calls become more explicit when Alfaro, reworking the Chicano liberatory agenda, proposes an uncompromising "queer Aztlán" beyond the Chicano family.²¹ "Orphan of Aztlán," the last poem in "Cuerpo politizado," serves as a manifesto for Alfaro's quest and also elaborates the queer undertow in "Bitter Homes and Gardens." Set in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles race riots, "Orphan of Aztlán" resists the myth of an America "that sells same, same, until we all act alike."²² Although this line recalls the sardonic depictions of the American dream in "Bitter Homes and Gardens," Alfaro does not explain his predicament in terms of a neatly binarized conflict between Anglo and Chicano. Rather, he attacks

Anglo-American, Mexican, and Chicano claims to inclusiveness by drawing attention to their exclusiveness—by highlighting how his “queer Chicano” status marks him as an “orphan,” a displaced figure in multiple settings:²³

I am a queer Chicano.
A native in no land.
An orphan of Aztlán,
The *pocho* son of farmworker parents.

The Mexicans only want me
when they want me to
talk about Mexico.
But what about
Mexican Queers in L.A.?

The Queers only want me
when they need
to add color,
add spice,
like *salsa picante*,
on the side.²⁴

Responding to many orphanhoods, Alfaro challenges the many who wield the “despotic signifier,” that is, the phallus that dominates the heterosexualizing social symbolic.²⁵ Alfaro implicitly pluralizes the symbolic to account for the many cultural and racialized spaces he shifts between: Chicano, Mexican, and Anglo-gay Americas. Thus he attacks the Chicano rejection of *pocho*—Chicano, often gringoized—queer sons and daughters, the Mexican willingness to embrace the Chicano on condition that the Chicano queer does not mention his queerness, and the Anglo-gay, neocolonizing exoticization of the Chicano queer. The question Alfaro poses is that if Americans are pressured to “all act alike,” then what image is meaningful to the Chicano queer orphan in the United States? Driven to find the answer, Alfaro kills the old, white God and replaces him with a new, queer fabrication: “a woman,” “a Latina,” “a Lesbian.”²⁶ The new deity, “She,” signifies an inversion of

the whole *enchilada*
[of] race
class

sex
gender
privilege. (238)

At the same time, she suggests the viability of a coalition formed on two fronts: between Chicano gays and Chicana lesbians, on the one hand, and between queer Chicanos and queer Latinos, on the other. Alfaro advocates a resiliently heterogeneous Latino and Latina queer community located, like him, in a “place called possibility” (239).

Alfaro's slippages between Chicano and Latino, Chicana and Latina, Chicano and Chicana, and Latino and Latina reflect a political stance vis-à-vis generic, gendered taxonomies. The umbrella term *Latino* has arisen as an alternative to the U.S. government's official use of *Hispanic*, a term that privileges the European and the linguistic as the central determinants of a supposedly coherent but homogenized ethnic identity and that erases the national-origin, racialized, classed, and gendered differences among and between Latino sectors.²⁷ Alfaro's taxonomic play draws attention to such differences. Moreover, umbrella terms such as *Latino*, *Chicano*, and *queer* imply, according to Diana Taylor, a dispute with “an essentialist identity grounded in blood, color, sexual identity and orientation”; the openness of the terms points to a negotiated existence as “dark,” “Chicano/a,” or “queer.”²⁸ Nonetheless, this negotiated-identity free play may have limits. Taylor neglects to mention that those who claim Chicano, dark, and queer identities may insist on grounding their claims in “blood, color, sexual identity and orientation.” Certainly, this insistence is present throughout Cherríe Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*, in which the attributes brown, woman, mother, lesbian, Chicana, Mexican, and Spanish provide the bases for the author's stance in opposition to the chain of white, man, father, straight, Anglo, American, and English categories.²⁹ For pragmatic and political reasons, such stances may not only be willfully exclusive but also signal the rejection of identifications that celebrate and even reify open-endedness or hybrid transgressivity.

Although Alfaro does celebrate a negotiated identificatory potential, his poem also reveals that less fluid grounds may be required to convert gay identities into a Latino bodily economy in which homosexuality signifies differently and to convert Latino identities into an Anglo-gay bodily economy. For Alfaro, the simulative challenge lies in

Making myself
fabulous

as I disentangle
 from the wreck
 of this
 cultural collision.³⁰

Alfaro describes the Borderlands as the stage on which his sexualized subjectivity can be performed into public view. He suggests that such performances contain the neocultural potential, emphasized by the entwining of Spanish and English, to queer Latino identities and latinize queer identities and hence to bring to pass the

espectáculos tan sabrosos [so tasty performances]
 that we call
 our Queer Latino selves.
 (241)

Such performances raise two questions. Are these queer selves performative fabrications? Or do the performances mask the queer grounds assumed to underlie them? The last stanzas of Alfaro's poem suggest his position. Queer Chicanos inhabit

the rim
 of the New World.
 And there is no place
 to run
 or hide. (241)

Thus they have no option but to stand their ground, to occupy Borderlands space publicly. Their assertiveness does not signify a claim to a neoliberal, individualist subjectivity. Rather, the occupation of a queer Borderlands space is rendered in terms of shared oppositions, in order

to create a language,
 a sense
 of what it means
 to be in community.
 (239)

This is the space, the "burned-out lot[s]" and corners of the barrio, that Alfaro's queer "I" steps into and moves through finally to address the reader:

Are you
a friend
or a
phobe? (241)

While Aztlán continues to signify a rival to America for Alfaro, as it did for certain elements of the Chicano movement, it is now reconceived by him as a grounded queer alternative. It becomes a place of resistant possibility only for a community of Latino and Latina subjects who are willing to contest their marginalization in many Americas. Alfaro's position exemplifies what Román calls a "politics of affinity," a concept indebted to Chela Sandoval's influential notion of an "oppositional consciousness" characterized by temporally shifting, differentiated alliances and multiple identity claims.³¹ A rhetorical call for visibility allows Alfaro to assert the presence of Chicano and Chicana queer identities in the Chicano, Mexican, and Anglo-gay fields of representation that have not recognized Chicano queers as an oppositional, collective possibility.

Nonetheless, Alfaro advocates Chicano queer visibility at some risk. Indeed, the displacements targeted in "Orphan of Aztlán" are particularly acute in "Deseo es memoria," the prose piece that precedes it. Like a series of journal entries, this piece records Alfaro's reactions to the death from AIDS of Julio, a friend whose "Queer Latino-Filipino" tag exemplifies how further "cultural collisions" complicate identity markers such as *Chicano* and *Latino*.³² In "Deseo es memoria" the poet rapidly and angrily moves through three scenes: in the first, a disbelieving, perplexed Alfaro compares Julio's involuntary death to the fate of Alan Lambert, an Anglo gay-pornography icon who committed suicide rather than lose his youthful looks; in the second, Alfaro describes the "last time" he talked to Julio, when, while they discussed Julio's symptoms, Alfaro's blond, gym-cloned date "kissed me on the *cheek* and never called"; and in the third, at Julio's funeral, the rival members of his blood and gay families are told by his mother that "his family did *not* support his lifestyle" (231–32). By juxtaposing these scenes, Alfaro reveals how Chicano and Latino queers are displaced not only by the predominant Anglo model of gayness but by a *latinidad* that denies Chicano and Latino queerness.

Damaging significations derived from AIDS discourses of shame and bodily abjection aggravate such displacements and denials. As "Deseo es memoria" makes clear, a polyvalent discursive clamor buffets the Chicano queer subject. Shifting in this piece between physically and psychically unsafe spaces in which the significations accruing to him as both Chicano and queer also shift, Alfaro

takes simulative aim at an array of deleterious signifying processes. This aspect of his agenda becomes particularly charged when he confronts the combined effects of the Chicano discourse of treachery, the state's surveillance of the barrio, and the ambivalences of the languages available to his project.

Barrio Queer, Family Traitor

The Chicano discourse of treachery centers on the historical figure *la Malinche*, the archetypal Mesoamerican traitor, who in slavery became Cortes's translator and consort and the symbolic mother of the mestizos. It is as *la Chingada* [the fucked one] and *la Vendida* [the sellout] that the accusations of betrayal are expressed. A "family quarrel" revolves around *la Malinche*, who, as a symbol of Spanish and Anglo-American conquests, becomes "a handy reference point . . . for controlling, interpreting or visualizing women."³³ Inheriting and burdened with this powerful icon of negativity, many Chicana critics and writers have attempted to counteract the bodily effects on Chicanas that the invocation of *la Malinche* or any of her synonyms have had.³⁴ There has not been a similar wave of Chicano responses to the *Malinche* discourse. The works of Cuadros and of Alfaro himself are exceptional in that they reflect not only a keen awareness of the impact of the Chicano "family quarrel" on its queer sons but also an indebtedness to Chicana feminist revisions of that quarrel.³⁵

In the monologue "Chicana Liberation," for instance, Alfaro rewrites the *Malinche/Chingada* script in terms of his mother's incipient feminist consciousness.³⁶ He recalls how his mother once collected all of her children, drove to the bar where her husband was drinking, and entered a territory "reserved for local men and fast women," where she broke "the sacred code" of feminine passivity: "My mother rewrote Chicana history as I knew it. She broke through hundreds of years of codes and rules reserved for Latina women in kitchens across the city. . . . Out of nowhere, my mother's fist . . . came so fast, my poor intoxicated father lost his balance and toppled over." At the monologue's end Alfaro wishfully rescripts his family's future: "This was the beginning of dinners together, A.A., Sunday afternoon soccer games, and the women's liberation movement in Downtown L.A." "Chicana Liberation" highlights how the family quarrel centered on *la Malinche* in part structures the oppression suffered by his mother and, by extension, by her queer son. By narrating women who contravene gendered scripts, Alfaro not only proposes a politicized assault on such scripts but implicitly interrelates Chicana feminist and Chicano queer agendas, as he does in the prose sequence "Pico-Union" and its oral version.

In "Pico-Union" Alfaro links the ritualized and discursive effects of *la Malinche's* invocation on the Chicano queer self to the state apparatus regulations of the Pico-Union barrio, where he grew up. This link is most evident when he reveals how the Chicano family's policing of the Chicano queer body occurs against the background of institutionalized surveillance to which all Chicanos are subjected: "One strong shove and a helicopter light has found me in downtown."³⁷ With this phrase Alfaro renders downtown Los Angeles as a space that conforms to the "cordon principle of immigrant and ethnic neighborhoods," by which the urban landscape, with its clearly marked "internal borders," is subjected to "state manipulation."³⁸ Keen to reveal the operation of state power as it intertwines with the family quarrel sparked by his queerness, Alfaro highlights the connections and divergences between the structures of state authority and those of the Chicano family.

Thus Alfaro's barrio piece of the Borderlands becomes an urban stage on which to play out his resistance to various pressures to conform: "I had to sleep on the floor with dark-skinned cousins from *ranchos* in *Jalisco* and although I hated it, I had to remember that, blood is thicker than water, family is greater than friends, and the Virgin Mary watches over all of us."³⁹ Repeated references to the Virgin suggest not only the Catholic glue in Chicano culture but a symbolism antithetical to the treachery Alfaro unwittingly embodies. In "Carburetor Memory" Alfaro describes how he was singled out as a potential *Chingada* by his brother, the favored firstborn son: "It was my brother's idea that I go work at the factory. Somebody saw me holding Paul Lee's hand in sixth grade and told my brother I was queer. The isolation of a production line would give me time to think. I pleaded with my mom but Mexican moms always listen to the men in the family. If the father is not available, that position is filled by the first born, no matter that my brother was only fifteen" (276).

So disciplined, Alfaro learns to recognize his betrayal of the machismo that his brother and father enact without question. Throughout "Pico-Union" Alfaro identifies instances of the macho ideal, only to undercut it with mockery or pathos: "Every father on Pico was required by the secret code of machismo to play pool, poker, or dominoes. I was always amazed at how well people in my neighborhood could play pool after going through dozens of beers. . . . Fathers on Pico knew how to drink. I didn't learn how to do this until much later" (281).

Later, however, Alfaro draws the connection between his father's alcoholism and *machista* pose and his own hungover emergence from a hustler's bathroom: "I open the door and see things that I never noticed much before. Cement alleys, hoodlums, bums, and the pain. I wonder if my father goes through this every time?" (283). Indeed, throughout "Pico-Union" Alfaro iterates how the

father's, the son's, and other family members' precarious claims for secure grounding diverge and reconverge in the same space, the *barrio*. Alfaro's "political tactic" here is intended "to challenge the alienation of the oppressed by demonstrating the affinities between and among people living in the city."⁴⁰ The surveillance that demarcates the *barrio* from the surrounding city cannot prevent the intermittent alignment of quotidian oppressions among its residents, including macho father and queer son.

This alignment is crucial in "Federal Building," a meditation on the "house of justice, invented by men in blue suits with badges."⁴¹ Alfaro contrasts these agents of the American state apparatus with the newly arrived relatives his family rescues from the street: "We used to drive by the halls—Justice, Taxes, Records, etc.—looking for distant Mexican relatives with phony passports ready for a life in Our Lady Queen of Angels" (279). In fact, Alfaro figures the Federal Building as a "big *chingona*," which he translates as "female gangster" (281) but which also connotes a big woman, a butch lesbian, or a woman who acts like a man. This description is apparently problematic, for in redirecting the *Chingada* script to characterize Anglo-American state power, Alfaro uses a misogynist Mexican and heterosexual Chicano insult commonly aimed at the women with whom the queer Alfaro claims to have an oppositional bond. At the same time, the semioculturation of *chingona* among Chicana lesbians, a reworking similar in principle to the more widespread reconversion of queer, may be at play here: on account of its symbolic inattentiveness to various Chicano subject positions, the Federal Building's power is insulted but perhaps grudgingly acknowledged. This metonym of Anglo-American power provides the target for a demonstration of migrant solidarity that Alfaro attended as a child with his father and for an ACT-UP demonstration at which the adult Alfaro was arrested: "So it isn't distant relatives from *ranchos* in *Jalisco* that get to share intimate moments with Justice deep in her bowels. It's one of her own" (280). Portrayed as the *chingona*'s victim, Alfaro's adult gay identification signifies his simultaneous distance from and closeness to his Mexican relatives.

According to Román, Alfaro moves in this vignette from an ethnic to a sexual identity position and also, thematically, between the mistreatment of migrants and the impact of AIDS on Latino and queer communities, which are rent by class differences as well.⁴² Through such shifts the demonstration scene emphasizes that even an American identity confirmed by a constitutional "right" to be arrested cannot guarantee or secure one's citizenship. As both Chicano and queer, Alfaro must literally fight for his American citizenship. This struggle is emphasized by his use of the Chicano dialect *chale*, which qualifies the institution's gaze as negating and dismissive: "I got arrested because . . . big beautiful buildings stare down

at you with a *chale* stare. Because I've lived here all my life and I've never owned anything, much less this city."⁴³ With this admission Alfaro realigns his queer self with a Chicano people collectively disenfranchised in the Los Angeles founded by their ancestors. In "Federal Building" the intertwining of economic marginalization, the government's lackluster response to AIDS, and its regulation of immigrant influxes with Chicano family surveillance of the sexually suspect body establishes the discursive coordinates of Alfaro's Chicano queerness. The use of *chale* also points to the centrality of language in a simulative challenge posed both to the Chicano family and to the nation-state whose embattled fronts converge in the barrio.

Arteaga argues that in the Borderlands "English and Spanish compete for presence and authority."⁴⁴ That is, English has the "status of authorization by the hegemony" in an America bolstered by global economic and military predominance. Spanish, by contrast, is a "third world" language south of the border and is "the language of the poor" in the United States (71). Yet Arteaga also claims that the border "is not the site of mere either/or linguistic choice but one of quotidian linguistic conflict where the utterance is born at home in English and Spanish and in *caló*," or Spanglish (70).⁴⁵ Arteaga defines "Chicano discourse" as a constant maneuvering between English, Spanish, and *caló*, with the result that "Chicano subjectification" becomes an effect of "the competition among languages."⁴⁶ In this formulation Chicano discourse explicitly "resists Anglo-American suppression of heteroglossia, much as the background noise of menials jars a social gathering" (73).

For Alfaro, however, the adoption of a queer identification complicates and challenges this apparently transgressive linguistic scenario. Not only is Chicano queer predicated on unpredictable, often simultaneously manifested moves toward and away from family, but these moves similarly characterize the Chicano queer's often ambivalent relationship to the Spanish parent language: English is the main idiom of many Chicanos and Latinos, queer or not. Arteaga's claim that English is the language of Anglo-American hegemony relegates English-only Chicanos, as well as partly deculturated Spanish-speaking Chicanos, to a zone outside a Chicano discourse romantically defined by an ability to switch codes. In this regard, Alfaro's use of English reflects how the identity displacements he experiences are linked to the very reasons that it may not be possible to take advantage of unimpeded linguistic border crossings. Thus for Alfaro, language use reiterates the decidedly unromantic stakes in Chicano queer quests to attain presence in whatever language is available. Moreover, his Chicano queer speaking position is continually qualified in two senses: by simulative and affiliative maneuvers into iden-

tity production and by the semiocultural aesthetic announced in “Cuerpo politizado” as the basis of his testimonial agenda:

Daring to tell
my truth
and my story
as best as I know how,
with what I have
invented
or stolen
from the
cultural catalogue.⁴⁷

Like contemporary *rascuachistas* such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Alfaro sees himself occupying a role in which “picked-up pens” signify “revolutionary acts” and writing signifies resistance.⁴⁸ Taking up the pen announces a dispute with the hegemonic processes by which Borderlands queers are known, silenced, or targeted for discursive and material violence. Often intended to be staged, Alfaro’s cultural productions may also appear as prose, poetry, or recordings and may be collaborations with other artists. At the same time, his work is as much a dialogue with Pico-Union’s streets and inhabitants as it is with clamoring processes of signification. Since his personal testimony is also a testimony of place, the topographical aspects of his work provide a resolution to another key issue raised by his simulative challenge: how can both queer self and home ground be translated into text? “Pico-Union” and its oral version on *Down Town* present a range of linguistic responses to this problem as Alfaro attempts “to go back to the very beginning and speak a neighborhood language like speaking in tongues.”⁴⁹

“Pico-Union” begins “on a street corner” (268) and establishes an alliterative and assonant rhythm that presages the cacophony of voices, noises, signs, desires, and dialogues of later scenes:

A slap
A slug
A shove
A kick
A kiss. (270)

The rhythm accompanies Alfaro’s complex weaving of the discursive and material conditions that have produced the queer son of an “immigrant father with the

brown *Michoacan* skin and the smell of liquor on his breath" (271). The earlier refrain is accompanied by other clamorings. For example, music reminds readers of resilient Latino, not simply Chicano, cultural forms: "*Messican* rhythm was a non-stop tango of *salsa*, *rancheras*, and *cumbias*. You could stop in the middle of the dance and not lose the beat. 'Cause the beat was in the heart. *Messican* beat was born on street corners in downtown L.A. A rhythm hiding in alleys behind Lucy's All-Nite-Taco's and the *Habana* Bakery" (270). "*Messican* rhythm" was also "our drunken fathers talking the strange language" (270), a recognition of the deculturation of Spanish experienced by Chicano queers like Moraga, Cuadros, and Alfaro himself.⁵⁰ Alfaro does not find the language unequivocally "strange," however, for he uses enough Spanish in his texts to create a linguistic version of his simulative challenge to the supposed dialectic between "Chicano" and "queer." Although he writes primarily in English, he feels at liberty to switch codes without translating, to "interrupt" the attention of his Anglo audience with reminders of the "other" origins of his stories.⁵¹ Since Alfaro has intervened as a Chicano queer in multiple settings and media, performing for Chicano, Latino, and Anglo queer and mainstream audiences, the languages he deploys to translate his Chicano queer self are directed at and received differently by shifting spectatorships, even at the same gatherings.⁵² Moreover, this interruptive tactic has implications for the reception of his textual works beyond his performances.

Echoed and reinforced by this tactic, Alfaro's oscillations between Chicano and queer are succinctly illustrated by "Roller Derby," in which he details a childhood obsession with roller-skating.⁵³ After skating at the local rink each Friday, his older brother would make Alfaro run into a wall. The physical pain that he describes, his "reward" for playing the macho game, merges with the pain he experiences at his father's hands: "It always hurt so much, but never as much as conversations with my dad. *¿Cuándo vas a parar de tomar? ¿Dónde duermes cuando no estás aquí? ¿Te gusta cuando me pegas? ¿Por qué no me dices que me quieres?*" [When are you going to stop drinking? Where do you sleep when you aren't here? Do you like it when you hit me? Why don't you tell me that you love me?]. Rattled off in hushed tones without breaks, the questioning chain of Spanish abruptly ends a monologue narrated up to this point in English. In the ensuing silence no responses are offered and no elaboration is forthcoming.

In "Roller Derby" Alfaro's passing from English to untranslated Spanish and then to silence mimics, at least for his monolingual Anglo listeners, the barrier of incomprehension between father and queer son. For his bilingual and Chicano queer audience, the shifts are even more suggestive; they counter, for example, the romanticization that shadows Arteaga's position, as well as Moraga's

riskily essentializing moves to reclaim Spanish as the authentic language of Chicana queer desire and intimacy.⁵⁴ For Alfaro in this monologue, Spanish conceals pain, brutality, alcoholism, and the lack of intimacy and communication within the home. It is the ambivalent medium by which a sometimes repressive family subjects suspect bodies to private surveillance and punishment and prevents them from attracting public attention. Alfaro reverses the disciplinarian use of language, however, turning the surveilling gaze back on the father so that even at this moment of pathos and pain the Chicano queer son may voice his dissent. Alfaro's deromanticizing use of the languages available to him provides his listeners with an insight into the powerful barriers opposing neocultural Chicano queer identities. Yet other barriers are evoked when Alfaro plays with the surface significations of his own body. For it is when he dons a dress and puts pressure on the normative categories of male and female, among others, that the transcultural stakes of his simulative challenge become most apparent.

Dragging Out the Terrains of Signification

According to Judith Butler, since "the boundaries of the body [form] the limits of the *socially* hegemonic," the body itself is the "effect of corporeal signification."⁵⁵ For Butler, "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest . . . the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts . . . are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications*" (136). Thus a phantasmic "identity" is maintained on the body by the discourses of both "masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality" (141). Butler nonetheless also recognizes in certain transvestite appearances the possibility that the identity effects favored by dominant discourses may be challenged by previously uncountenanced simulations (139–41). In Alfaro's case, however, while the simulative challenge is focused on the body in the ways Butler describes, it is also intended as a retort to disciplinarian discourses that would simply disregard his appearances as phantasmic. In this respect Alfaro's drag moves to attain visibility work against the key transvestite ambition identified by Severo Sarduy: "El animal-travestí no busca una apariencia amable para atraer (ni una apariencia desagradable para disuadir), sino una incorporación de la fijeza para desaparecer" [The animal-transvestite seeks not a pleasant appearance to attract (or a disagreeable appearance to deter) but an embodiment of fixity in order to vanish].⁵⁶ As an occasionally cross-dressed performance artist, then, Alfaro aims to keep multiple processes of signification from

regulating his body against his queer interests or from misrecognizing the resistant matter of his body's queer appearances.

Perhaps best witnessed on the stage, Alfaro's drag-framed call for queer visibility also occurs to great effect as text in "Vistiendo en drag" and "Abuelita," the opening poetry sequences of "Cuerpo politizado."⁵⁷ Accompanied by photographs of his multiply cross-dressed bodies, the poems narrate Alfaro's attempts to situate the Borderlands clash of visual signs and discourses on his body. "Vistiendo en drag" is introduced with a black-and-white photograph of Alfaro spotlit in a drag performance that does not simulate a woman. A shimmering dress adheres to his body, his legs and chest are unwaxed, he forgoes a wig, and his clenched hands evoke a torch singer's pose. The borderline between male body and female-signifying attire is reflected in the double face that his movement has left on film and in the contrast between his pale body and its shadow. If Alfaro's appearance here supports his claim that "drag, it is a man's field," it also alludes to the impact of the light and dark aspects of *mestizaje* on his Borderlands cultural, gender, and sexual makeup (217).

In "Vistiendo en drag" that makeup is figured as a drag preference for "those fierce independent Latinas" like the *ranchera* singers Lucha Villa and Lola Beltrán over Anglo-American icons like Jayne Mansfield (217). The favored "Mexicana icon[s]" are the women whose very bodily terrains are staked by rival signifying systems. They are the "long-suffering" women who

Prefer to show the lines
 on their faces,
 like maps,
 bearing skin,
 with wrinkles,
 tracing history
 of experience.
 (217)

Later in the poem Alfaro describes his drag self "battling for mirror space" (218), the simulative challenge now being to interpret a self from a reflection, a not-real. His cross-dressed Latino body, and by implication certain Latina bodies, is the product of a battle of signification not simply between Anglo and Mexican icons but between the highly valued role models for Mexican women—represented here by Mexico's patron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and Frida Kahlo⁵⁸—and the clamoring low of Mexican soap operas,

where low production cost [*sic*]
 and bad lighting
 showed all traces
 of woman/hood.

(218)

In Alfaro's battle with signifying processes, woman as hood wins. This is the woman who publicly disregards or rebels against the stereotype of passive Latina femininity, from the *puta* [whore] to the "strong, independent" woman and those "women who wander and roam, . . . who don't stay at home tending to their husbands, children, parents."⁵⁹ As Jean Franco reminds us, these women defy patriarchal expectations, but at a huge cost to their reputations: "The public woman is a prostitute, the public man a prominent citizen. When a woman goes public, she leaves the protected spaces of home and convent and exposes her body."⁶⁰ Alfaro equates his drag persona with "*that* kind of girl," resignified as a camp, attention-seeking "performance goddess."⁶¹ His uninhibited, celebratory camp stance is directed, too, at dispensing with the "Aztec" script of Chicana working-class victimhood, which stereotypically casts its players in the socioeconomic margins as either the "king Taco waitress" or the

burrito-making
project living
mujer. (219)

By modeling his drag appearance on the bad woman, Alfaro prepares the ground—see Román's "politics of affinity" or José Piedra's "sissy nationalism"⁶²—on which to introduce his masculine queerness into the poem:

Dare to show
 bulge in my crotch
 because I am
that tough.⁶³

The final stanzas name the stakes of this pose, by which Alfaro redefines the poem as a "testimonio" of survival as a

heroin IV
 arm-scarred
 history queen

and of moments of desire enacted downtown,

when dark-skinned
homeboys
traced the wounds
on my chest
with blood-red lips
that whispered,
“Shit, you are one tough
chola.” (220)

Alfaro's drag tribute to the “tough / *chola*” (a homegirl or female gang member) ends by highlighting the commonalities of his own and the bad Chicana's resistance to Borderlands gender, sexual, and racialized significations.⁶⁴ The poem's defiance is mirrored in the photograph on the facing page of Alfaro in masculine attire. His unwavering gaze induces the reader-viewer of his poem-image to connect the male-coded image and the drag images of the accompanying text, particularly since the photograph does not appear to fit the poem's final lines: “*Siempre feliz / en mi falda*” [Always happy [i.e., queer] / in my skirt] (220). The photograph jars the viewer not by signifying the male drag performer's masculine privilege of casting off the “signs of the obscenely feminine” but by exposing the simulative ruse of Alfaro's masculine appearances.⁶⁵

“Abuelita” maintains the provocations begun in “Vistiendo en drag.” The poem is introduced with the refrain “I've been redeemed by the blood of the lamb,” but Alfaro then infects the Catholic-derived redemptive call with ambivalence and loss, much as Cuadros does in his prose and poetry collection *City of God*.⁶⁶ The poem's first half deals with Alfaro's childhood reactions to his visiting Mexican grandmother, who transforms the Alfaro household into a piece of Mexico via “Channel 34 / the Spanish-language station” (223). The young Alfaro meditates on how the signs of his *abuelita*'s world have been reconverted in his family so that pet dogs have the names of his father's “ideal / vacation spots” in Mexico, and family history

is honored
but constantly renamed
making the weight
of our painful stories
easy to bear.
(224)

Even more incongruous than the pet names is the magazine his *abuelita* reads, “sort of a *Cosmopolitan* / for the Latino set” (224), with its idealized images of “dyed-blond Latinas / making tortillas,” of Latino kitsch “Mayan-designed / wood-burning pits” (224), of privilege and North American commodity values. The popular-media “ideal” Latina is immediately undercut, however, by the earthy story of

Auntie Bad Breath,
who witnessed
a distempered dog
bite Uncle Crooked Back
in the leg.
(224)

The Latina ideal is unsettled, too, with the photograph of Alfaro in a dark evening dress, standing against a dark background, the darknesses merging and receding behind the looming paleness of his bared face, upper torso, and arms.

Once again Alfaro’s expressionless face defies the viewer to make sense of the conjunction of text and image, to impose meaning on Alfaro’s bodily territory. Here his mestizo self eludes capture within the image’s sharp demarcations between light and dark, positive and negative shapes. Here the undulating line drawn by the upper edge of the dress mimics the geopolitical border between the Anglo (pale) and Latin (dark) Americas. Alluding also to the transvestism of the Spanish for “homeland”—*la madre patria*, literally “the mother-fatherland”⁶⁷—Alfaro’s appearance cannot be nationally or culturally “homed.” Furthermore, class borders are evoked and disturbed by the evening dress as a bourgeois signifier at odds with the working-class barrio performer inside it. Thus Alfaro does not respond to dominant identity paradigms by disappearing in simulative camouflage. Rather, he frustrates longings to discipline his Chicano queerness by clothing one sign, his masculine body, in an excess of signs. Rival identity effects of gender, race, sexuality, class, nation, and geography are unanchored in a signifying clamor that breaks out on the ground of the masculine body.

The poem continues with Alfaro’s *abuelita*’s treating a cut on his finger by sucking his blood. His reaction veers from the sensual,

I feel the inside of her mouth,
wet and warm,
her teeth
lightly pulling,

to the sensational,

Being in this womb
feels as if I am being
eaten alive
on one of those
late night
Thriller Chiller movies,

before the significance of his grandmother's response hits home:

This is the only way
that Abuelita
knows how to
stop the bleeding.⁶⁸

The poem's last section provides the present point of comparison with the grandmother's method of assuaging pain. Alfaro has again cut his finger, this time while

Making another pamphlet
critical of those
who would like
to see us dead.
(228)

The shift of scene from the Chicano blood family of childhood to a new family of Latino AIDS activists in adulthood resignifies Alfaro's blood into a contaminated substance of "mortality and fate" that none of his coactivists wants to get near (228). In the photograph opposite the poem Alfaro stands hands on hip, expressionless, stripped for public scrutiny. This time the simulative challenge is literally laid bare: how, and with what consequences, does this naked body signify?

Alfaro's appearance in photograph and poem embodies "a problematic[s] of reception," signifying punitively yet differently in "two conflicting fields of power: the kinship systems of his Latino family and of an imagined gay community."⁶⁹ In the stanzas that appear after the photograph this is confirmed when Alfaro sucks the blood from his finger while wishing "for an *abuelita* / in this time" of "plague," "loss," "sorrow," "mourning," and "shame."⁷⁰ The poem ends with the words:

And I
heal myself.

I heal myself
 with *Abuelita's*
Primitive Latino First Aid Kit.
 (230)

If this stanza moves toward a reconciliation with Alfaro's grandmother and her culture, it also reiterates a point made in "Deseo es memoria": Chicano queers are often impelled to form their own activist communities as "orphans," without their parent culture's approval or support. Orphanhood is exacerbated, too, by AIDS discourses of shame: significations imposed discursively on his blood punish Alfaro even within his activist family.

The Politics of Semiocultural Play

As "Abuelita" suggests, Alfaro's simulative challenge does not guarantee him immunity from damaging processes of signification. Nonetheless, semiocultural play enables him periodically, but not unequivocally, to frustrate a range of discursive border patrols of his body. Indeed, to render Chicano queer a neocultural possibility, Alfaro deploys a measured mix of anger, humor, pathos, camp celebration, interlingual switching, and didactic juxtaposition. At the same time, by making his own body into the very ground on which a signifying clamor is staged in order to bring his Chicano queer self into public view, Alfaro reveals how the claim to a Chicano queer subjectivity is unavoidably buffeted by competing, contradictory, and disciplinary discourses.

Alfaro's simulative challenge profoundly refuses to respect the conceptual coherences of multiple terrains: metropolitan American, paradigmatic Anglo-American gay, metropolitan Mexican, and barrioized Chicano and Latino. Most pointedly, Alfaro insists that because these are politicized, overlapping cultural territories, each must acknowledge its Chicano queer sectors. Alfaro makes evident a desire to work visibly, if equivocally, with his own body against the conservatively interested myth of authentic, unfabricated identities organized around the poles of a range of conventional body-fixing matrices: male-female, heterosexual-homosexual, white-colored, high-low, citizen-alien, bourgeois-working-class, pure-impure, and some or all of these in combination. By working with the frenzied play of signs that have fixed Chicano and queer in a taxonomic dialectic of incompatibility within the borders of the United States, Alfaro affirms the neocultural possibility of the Chicano queer self. It is a politicized self that emerges in and as a ceaseless, unpredictable making-do. Alfaro asserts the right to intervene in the

realms of signifying possibility when he says: "We will continue to create these *espectáculos tan sabrosos* that we call our Queer Latino selves."⁷¹

Notes

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1. Luis Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," in *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*, ed. Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (Seattle, Wash.: Bay, 1994), 236, 220.
2. Luis Alfaro, "Bitter Homes and Gardens," in *His: Brilliant New Fiction by Gay Writers*, ed. Robert Drake, with Terry Wolverton (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 100–107; Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," which combines poetry ("Vistiendo en drag," "Abuelita," and "Orphan of Aztlán"), prose ("Deseo es memoria"), and photographs by Laura Aguilar (216–41); and Alfaro, "Pico-Union," in *Men on Men 4: Best New Gay Fiction*, ed. George Stambolian (New York: Dutton, 1992), 268–83. The "Pico-Union" text quoted in this essay is a version of some vignettes that appeared in Alfaro's performance piece *Downtown* and on his CD, *Down Town* (Lawndale, Calif.: New Alliance Records, 1993). Yet another textual version of *Downtown* combines sections of the "Cuerpo politizado" and "Pico-Union" texts with some of the oral pieces from *Down Town* ("Notes on Downtown/Downtown," in *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*, ed. Holly Hughes and David Román [New York: Grove, 1998], 315–48).
3. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute, 1987), 3, 78–80; Susana Chávez-Silverman, "Tropicalada: Inside the U.S. Latino/a Gender B(l)ender," in *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad*, ed. Frances R. Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1997), 113; Alfred Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics: Heterotexts and Hybridities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 34–35; Annamarie Jagose, *Lesbian Utopics* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 157.
4. Alfaro, "Notes on Downtown/Downtown," 316.
5. Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, trans. Harriet de Onís (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 102–3.
6. Silvia Spitta, "Transculturation, the Caribbean, and the Cuban-American Imaginary," in Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, *Tropicalizations*, 161.
7. Ángel Rama, *Transculturación narrativa en América Latina* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1982), 38–39.
8. Spitta, "Transculturation," 161.
9. Teresa de Lauretis, "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities: An Introduction," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991): iii–iv.

10. The queer espoused by Queer Nation illustrates how queer may not necessarily do what some of its advocates claim. From my perspective in Australia, whose own not inconsiderable queer cultures are buffeted by a neocolonizing American narrative of happily commodified, homogenized, and whitened gay- and lesbianhood, queer travels the Pacific under and by virtue of the hegemonic aegis of "America," which refers not to a continental field but to a specific metropolcentrism. For example, many Australian queers celebrate Stonewall, untroubled by their dehistoricized assimilation into another history or their conversion into queer-replicant citizens of the American imperium. Moreover, Queer Nation's activities and ironic, icon-appropriating rhetoric—"I pledge allegiance to the f(l)ag"—are framed by a peculiarly American discourse of transgression as compulsive, excessive consumption. Thus the suspicion arises that Queer Nation's agenda has been damaged by its failure to interrogate what either *flag* or *fag* might signify beyond the United States, whether southward from the U.S. Borderlands or in other territories that also have highly charged political and cultural relationships with the United States (Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993], 193). David Bergman's description of his own coming-out-as-queer epiphany provides another example of queer's potential blindness to the exclusionary connotations of "America": "On a scrap of paper, I jotted 'To be American is to be queer,' and in so doing united the currents of the national spirit with my literary ancestry and my erotic desires. . . . Suddenly I felt that my sexuality, rather than marginalizing me in the traditions of American literature, actually placed me within its central channels" (*Gaiety Transfigured: Gay Self-Representation in American Literature* [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991], 10). Needless to say, Bergman's happy reconciliation with American literary hegemony suggests a many-leveled queer privilege quite distinct from the queer advocated and embodied by Alfaro.
11. Donna Perry, "Gloria Anzaldúa Interview," in *Backtalk: Women Writers Speak Out* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 32.
12. Tomás Almaguer, "Chicano Men: A Cartography of Homosexual Identity and Behaviour," *differences* 3, no. 2 (1991): 88.
13. Paul Allatson, "AIDS and the Resignification of 'Chicano Queer' in the Work of Gil Cuadros," *Journal of Homosexuality* (forthcoming).
14. This is one of the most significant lessons of the transcultural mode derived from Ortiz's work. Speaking of his native Cuba in the 1940s, Ortiz argued against the use of the English terms *assimilation* and *acculturation*, because they implied European ascendancy in "the process of transition from one culture to another" and relied on the assumption that metropolitan centers imposed their cultures on passively receptive peripheries without being affected by cultural interchange themselves (*Cuban Counterpoint*, 102–3).

15. David Román, "Tropical Fruit," in Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman, *Tropicalizations*, 121.
16. Alfaro, "Bitter Homes and Gardens," 100.
17. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 71.
18. José Esteban Muñoz, "Flaming Latinas: Ela Troyano's *Carmelita Tropicana: Your 'Kunst' Is Your 'Waffen'* (1993)," in *The Ethnic Eye: Latino Media Arts*, ed. Chon A. Noriega and Ana M. López (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 130.
19. Rosaura Sánchez, "Ethnicity, Ideology, and Academia," *Cultural Studies* 4 (1990): 297.
20. See, e.g., Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco A. Lomeli, eds., *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland* (Albuquerque, N.Mex.: Academia/El Norte, 1989).
21. Cherríe Moraga, *The Last Generation: Prose and Poetry* (Boston: South End, 1993), 145–74.
22. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 234.
23. Alfaro's use of "orphan" also allies him with Chicano objections to Octavio Paz's characterization of the Mexican American in 1950 as an orphan who "has lost his whole inheritance: language, religion, customs, beliefs" (*The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp [London: Lane, 1967], 7). For a critique of Mexican metropolitan denigrations of Chicanos see "Interview with Tomás Ybarra-Frausta: The Chicano Movement in a Multicultural/Multinational Society," in *On Edge: The Crisis of Contemporary Latin American Culture*, ed. George Yúdice, Juan Flores, and Jean Franco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 211–15.
24. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 235.
25. Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Daniella Dangoor (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 95.
26. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 237.
27. For an excellent discussion of the rise of *Hispanic* as a homogenizing label that obscures the very different reasons for individual and group residency in the United States, see Suzanne Oboler, *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives: Identity and the Politics of (Re)Presentation in the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
28. Diana Taylor, "Opening Remarks," in *Negotiating Performance: Gender, Sexuality, and Theatricality in Latin/o America*, ed. Diana Taylor and Juan Villegas (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 6.
29. Cherríe Moraga, *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó por Sus Labios* (Boston: South End, 1983).
30. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 239.
31. David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 185–86; Chela Sandoval, "U.S. Third World

- Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World," *Genders* 10 (1991): 1–24.
32. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 231–32.
 33. Norma Alarcón, "Chicana's Feminist Literature: A Re-vision through Malintzin / Or Malintzin: Putting Flesh Back on the Object," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 2d ed. (New York: Kitchen Table/Women of Color, 1983), 182.
 34. The Chicana writers who address *la Malinche* include Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 30–31; Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, 112–17; Alvina E. Quintana, *Home Girls: Chicana Literary Voices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 41–43; and Carla Trujillo, "Chicana Lesbians: Fear and Loathing in the Chicano Community," in *Chicana Lesbians: The Girls Our Mothers Warned Us About*, ed. Carla Trujillo (Berkeley, Calif.: Third Woman, 1991), 186–94.
 35. In Cuadros's sardonically titled story "Indulgences," the narrator's aunt must submit to the authority of her entire extended family, which holds her responsible for the death of the great-grandfather patriarch entrusted to her care (*City of God* [San Francisco: City Lights, 1994], 3–14). The women in the family mete out a punishment that introduces the youthful narrator to the regulatory structure of a Chicano bodily economy and alerts him to the sorts of punishments that might befall him if he transgresses against gender conventions or communal values. See my analysis of the story in relation to the *Malinche* discourse in "AIDS and the Resignification of 'Chicano Queer.'"
 36. Alfaro, *Down Town*, track 5.
 37. Alfaro, "Pico-Union," 271. In *Downtown*, the performance version of "Pico-Union," Alfaro intertwines stories of childhood, queer desire, Catholic faith and faithlessness, Chicano and Chicana gender conventions, factory conditions, the *colonias* on the Mexican side of the border around the Anglo-American-owned *maquiladoras*, family quarrels and intimacies, state surveillance, AIDS activism, and Mexican migration. For a wide-ranging examination of Latino and Chicano queer performance that, in turn, contextualizes a detailed discussion of the material and discursive concerns in Alfaro's staged version of the prose and oral texts I examine, see "Teatro Viva!" in Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 177–201.
 38. Barbara Harlow, "Sites of Struggle: Immigration, Deportation, Prison, and Exile," in *Reconfigured Spheres: Feminist Explorations of Literary Space*, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet and Joan Templeton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 120, 109.
 39. Alfaro, "Pico-Union," 273–74.
 40. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 192.
 41. Alfaro, "Pico-Union," 279.
 42. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 194–95.
 43. Alfaro, "Pico-Union," 281.

44. Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics*, 70.
45. According to Anzaldúa, *caló*, *pachuco*, or Spanglish is a distinct, urban Chicano Spanish that retains Spanish expressions no longer used elsewhere while extensively borrowing from, and Hispanicizing, English (*Borderlands*, 56–57).
46. Arteaga, *Chicano Poetics*, 73.
47. Alfaro, “Cuerpo politizado,” 240.
48. Alfaro, *Down Town*, track 16. *Rascuachismo* has been called a Chicano aesthetic, “an underclass sensibility rooted in everyday linguistic practices and in artistic works put together out of whatever was at hand,” a making do necessitated by poverty (“Interview with Tomás Ybarra-Fraustá,” 208). Employed by Chicano artists in a range of disciplines and media, most famously by El teatro campesino, *rascuachismo* reinforces didactic messages by modeling cultural production on quotidian Borderlands experiences and struggles. To characterize Alfaro as a *rascuachista* is not, however, to subsume his queer agenda in El teatro campesino’s or Gómez-Peña’s projects. Alfaro’s work acknowledges the positions of Latinas, not simply of Latina lesbians, as subjects whose quotidian semiocultural tactics may overlap with, diverge from, and also influence his own. Similar attentiveness to gender and sexual issues has at times been absent from the work of El teatro campesino and Gómez-Peña, as the following accounts point out: Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano, “The Female Subject in Chicano Theatre: Sexuality, ‘Race,’ and Class,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 131–49; Yolanda Julia Broyles, “Women in El Teatro Campesino: ‘¿Apoco Estaba Molacha la Virgen de Guadalupe?’” in *Chicana Voices: Intersections of Class, Race, and Gender*, ed. Teresa Córdova et al. (Austin, Tex.: National Association for Chicano Studies, 1990), 162–87; and Chávez-Silverman, “Tropicolada,” 107–10.
49. Alfaro, “Pico-Union,” 268.
50. In her essay “Art in América con acento” Moraga writes, “I am the result of the dissolution of blood lines and the theft of language” (*Last Generation*, 54). Similarly, in Cuadros’s short story “My Aztlan: White Place,” the narrator declares that, “like a disease-ridden blanket, revenge was on my parents, to be gay and not speak Spanish” (*City of God*, 56). In “Notes on Downtown/Downtown” Alfaro alludes to his own deculturated Spanish: while working in Mexico City, “I learned to speak Spanish again” (Hughes and Román, *O Solo Homo*, 317).
51. Alfaro, *Down Town*, track 16. This approach is endorsed by Anzaldúa, who recognizes that the myth of a monocultural America is at stake in her code switching (“Interview,” 22).
52. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 196.
53. Alfaro, *Down Town*, track 10. Another version of “Roller Derby” appears in “Notes on Downtown/Downtown” (Hughes and Román, *O Solo Homo*, 324). There the Spanish is preceded by the imperative “Oye, Papa.”

54. Moraga, *Loving in the War Years*, 136.
55. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 131, 136.
56. Severo Sarduy, *La simulación* (Caracas: Monte Avila, 1982), 16.
57. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 217–30.
58. The Virgin of Guadalupe is a potent symbol of regulated femininity in the Mexican discourse of *marianismo*, the cult of the Virgin Mary. Since *marianismo* is considered to structure female behaviors and appearances in tandem with *machismo*, the Virgin of Guadalupe, Mexico's transculturated version of the Virgin Mary, has been targeted for revision by Chicana feminists. For insightful analyses of this figure see Evelyn P. Stevens, "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," in *Female and Male in Latin America: Essays*, ed. Ann Pescatello (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 89–101; and Tey Diana Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow: A Cultural Analysis of Chicana Literature* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 49–57. Alfaro's sardonic reference to the Mexican modernist painter Frida Kahlo, whom he claims he "gave up on . . . / when all the girls / started to grow / their mustaches / on Wilshire Boulevard," is motivated by her 1980s rise to cult status in the United States, assisted in part by Madonna's widely reported interest in her ("Cuerpo politizado," 218).
59. Rebolledo, *Women Singing in the Snow*, 183.
60. Quoted in Diana Taylor, "Performing Gender: *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*," in Taylor and Villegas, *Negotiating Performance*, 304 n. 21.
61. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 219.
62. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 185–86; and José Piedra, "Nationalizing Sissies," in *¿Entiendes? Queer Readings, Hispanic Writings*, ed. Emilie L. Bergmann and Paul Julian Smith (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995), 386–88.
63. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 219.
64. In some Latin American dialects of Spanish, *chola* also refers to a mestiza, but with the emphasis on Indian blood. For certain readers this signification may be at work here.
65. Kim Michasiw, "Camp, Masculinity, Masquerade," *differences* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 163.
66. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 222.
67. Amy K. Kaminsky comments on the gender-genre ambiguities of the Spanish terms in *Reading the Body Politic: Feminist Criticism and Latin American Women Writers* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 5–6.
68. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 227.
69. Román, *Acts of Intervention*, 190.
70. Alfaro, "Cuerpo politizado," 230.
71. *Ibid.*, 241.